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THE CONDOR A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY.



Volume VI

March-April, 1904

Number 2

Two Oregon Warblers

BY WILLIAM L. FINLEY

ILLUSTRATED BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

DURING the warm days of May when the mystery of life seems suddenly unveiled in a miraculous manner, I often frequent a woody retreat above the old mill dam on Fulton creek. A clump of firs and maples overhang where the limpid water whirls gurgling among the gray rocks. Star flowers gleam from the darker places of shade, white anemones are scattered among grass blades and ferns, and Linnæan bells overhang the moss-covered logs. This is the haunt of the black-throated gray warbler.^a

Just below the brow of the hill half a mile above the creek, a little spring bubbles out of an alder copse. Instead of trickling down the hillside like an ordinary streamlet, the water scatters and seeps into the spongy soil. This forms a wet place an acre or so in extent over which has grown a rich growth of swamp grass. This is the yellow-throat's^b home. I call it the "Witch's Garden."

I have a great admiration for the little feathered individual dressed in gray because his extreme shyness is a good indication of his finer nature. But there is a fascination about lying in the shade of the tall fir and listening to the fanciful call of yellow-throat. You may hear him and his mate almost any time of the day calling "Witch-et-y! Witch-et-y! Witch-et-y!" Yes, you may hear him but seldom see him.

What a little deceiver this golden sprite is! Looking for his nest is something like searching for the bags of gold at the rain-bow's tip. Among the feathered falsifiers this bird is certainly a leader. If you plod through the grass looking for

^a *Dendroica nigrescens*.

^b *Geothlypis trichas arizela*.



BLACK-THROATED GRAY WARBLER FEEDING YOUNG

his straw basket of eggs, he'll call "Here it is! Here it is!" and a minute later he'll screech the same lie from another tussock ten yards away.

Why Nature put that jet black mask across his countenance is more than I can guess, unless it was to enable him to sing his falsehoods without a blush. His wife must be a model for she goes about gossiping without the sign of a veil. It's the Turkish custom reversed.

I never know just when yellow-throat is going to depart in the fall or just when he will return in the spring. I have never seen him going away or coming back. You may hear him one day and find your garden tenantless the following. Then, after a long silence, you wake up some morning and find he's there again, as if he had grown out of the ground during the night, like a toad-stool. After his return in the spring it's never long before he is scratching out a pit in a dry grass-bunch to line with bark strips and shreds.

No, for all my trouble I didn't find the nest and eggs, though I besieged the



FEMALE YELLOW-THROAT

swampy patch a dozen times. But one day as I skirted the edge of the garden, a streak of yellow darted from under my feet. She was brooding a basket of naked nestlings. Then I laid siege, not too close at first. I trained my camera on the most advantageous perches about the vicinity. I narrowed in day by day. The warblers soon grew accustomed to the click of the shutter. Then I leveled my Long-focus squarely on the nest.

Bird families are like human families in many ways. Sometimes a husband is as thoughtful about household duties as the wife, in other cases he rarely it ever assists in the care of the children. It is generally far more difficult to photograph a male bird than a female. Yellow-throat was a pleasing exception. He worked side by side with his wife and never feared or faltered for an instant.

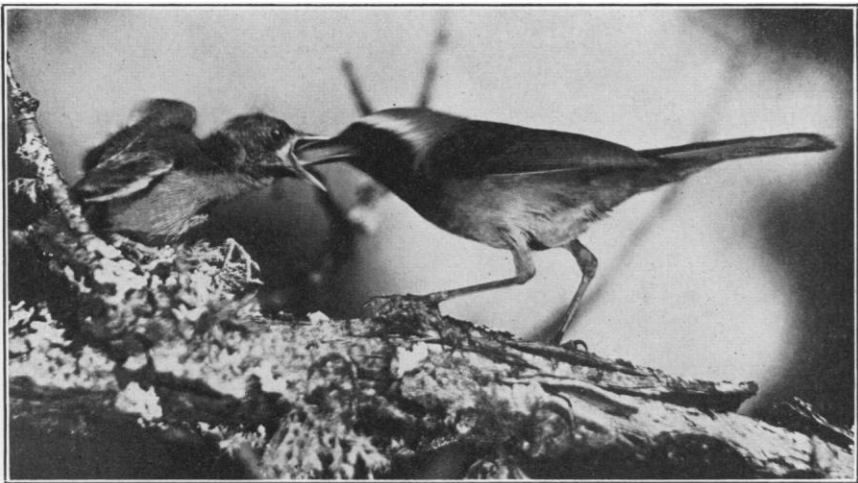
This was not the case in the black-throated gray warbler family. The pater familias seemed unavoidably detained away from home on matters of business or social importance most of the day when the children were crying for food. The wife took entire charge of feeding and caring for the nestlings. Only the male has the jet black throat, which is a distinctive mark of the species. The female wears a white cravat. But, to my notion, she is a deal more important in warbler affairs than her more highly marked mate.

Fortunately, just at the side of the fir sapling, in which we found the gray warbler's nest, was the sawed-off stump of a large tree. Upon this we could climb

and look into the nest. When I first parted the branches and looked into the feather-lined cup, two small nestlings stretched their skinny necks and opened their mouths with unmistakable signs of hunger.

The moment the mother returned and found me at the nest she was scared almost out of her senses. She fell from the top of the tree in a fluttering fit. She caught quivering on the limb a foot from my hand. But unable to hold on, she slipped through the branches and clutched my shoe. I never saw such an exaggerated case of the chills. I stooped to see what ailed her. She wavered like an autumn leaf to the ground. I leaped down, but she had limped under a bush and suddenly got well. Of course I knew she was tricking me! But I never saw higher skill in a feathered artist.

The next day my heart was hardened against all her alluring wiles and crocodile tears. She played her best, but the minute she failed to win, I got a furious berating. It was no begging note now. She perched over my head and called me every name in the warbler vocabulary. When she saw I was shoving the one-



MALE YELLOW-THROAT FEEDING YOUNG

eyed monster right at her children, she screamed "Fly! Fly! for your lives." Both the scanty-feathered, bob-tailed youngsters jumped blindly out of the nest into the bushes below. She outdid all previous performances. But not to be fooled, I kept an eye on one nestling and soon replaced him in the nest where he belonged. I looked for half an hour and then found the second dumpy little fellow sitting right before my eyes. Nature always hides such creatures from me by an almost invisible veil of mystery. I've seen a flock of half a dozen grouse flutter up into a fir and disappear to my eyes as completely as a cloud of fog before the sun.

It was easy enough to get pictures of the nest and young, but a very different matter to get the parents within shot of the camera. After frequent visits, however, the gray mother seemed to recognize the camera as harmless. This took time and an unlimited amount of patience, but it gave the best opportunities of studying the bird's habits.

The first day I really met the gray gentleman face to face was when I was trying to get a photograph of the mother as she came home to feed. She had

gotten quite used to the camera. I had the instrument leveled point blank at the nest only a yard distant. A gray figure came flitting over the tree top and planted himself on the limb right beside the home. He carried a green cut-worm in his mouth. No sooner had he squatted on his accustomed perch than he caught sight of the cyclops. With an astonished chirp, he dropped his worm, threw a back somerset, and all I saw was a meteor-like streak of gray curving up over the pointed firs. I doubt if he felt any degree of safety till he got across the Willamette,



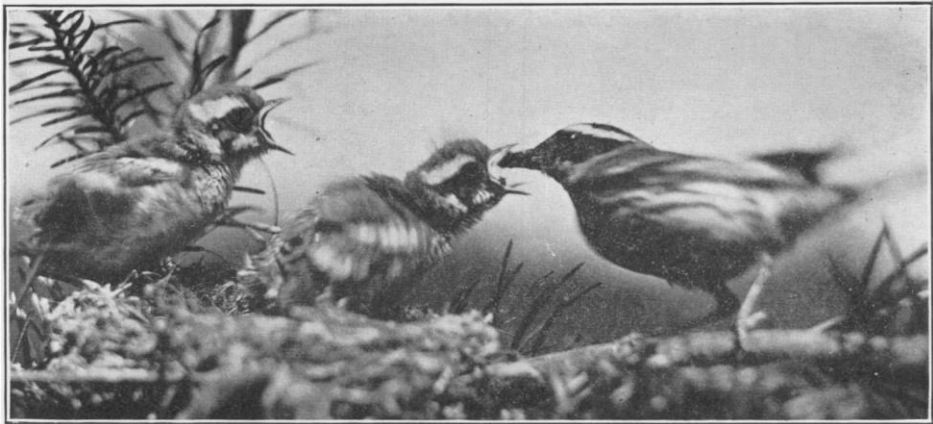
MALE YELLOW-THROAT AND YOUNG

for he didn't get up courage enough to even enquire about the children the rest of that day.

I didn't think his lordship figured in home affairs at all, but I must have been mistaken. The next day the mother again tried to lure me from the nest. Just as she was putting on a few extra agonizing touches, I saw a glint of gray. The father pounced upon his feigning spouse. I never witnessed such a case of wife beating. I'm not an expert on bird ethics but such a performance would be some-

what scandalous among my own neighbors. Maybe he blamed his wife for my interference or he may have been tired of her fooling, at any rate she quit her deceiving antics and soon led her children off through the bushes.

Berkeley, Cal.



FEMALE BLACK-THROATED GRAY WARBLER FEEDING YOUNG

Nesting Habits of the Black-headed Grosbeak

BY ANNA HEAD

DOES the same pair of birds return to their old nesting-site? This is a question difficult to determine, as, from the nature of things positive evidence is almost impossible to secure. In some cases a ring has been fastened about the leg of one of a pair, and so it has been proven that he returned several years in succession to the same locality. But from slight indications pointing in the same direction, even though no positive proof is forthcoming, I am inclined to think this is commoner than usually supposed. The evidence which has convinced me may not be so cogent to another as to myself. It depends chiefly upon individual traits of character and of song observed for two successive years in a small valley in Mendocino county. The bird to which I paid most attention was the black-headed grosbeak (*Zamelodia melanocephala*), and at the end of the first summer I felt personally acquainted with several pairs.

In one pair the female was brave and did a large part of the feeding, brooding the birds willingly in my presence, while the male circled about and sang incessantly. This pair chose a damp willow thicket, the home of the chat, for their nest, and placed it rather high on a swaying twig of willow, stayed by two crossing blackberry vines. I had the pleasure of watching the whole course of rearing the young, and saw where they were led off to the right along the edge of the swamp, while still totally destitute of tails and very downy about the head. This I consider a rather unusual nesting site, as the grosbeak seems to prefer dry hill-sides and manzanita, madrone, or hazel bushes. So when the second year I found